

Morphosyntactic Structure of Negation in Izhi-Igbo

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Abstract

This paper provides a descriptive and analytical account of negation in Izhi, an Igbo dialect spoken in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, with particular attention to its morphosyntactic structure, aspectual sensitivity, and interaction with tone. Negation in Izhi is realised through a bipartite morphemic configuration, ta/te...du, which functions in a manner analogous to a circumfix. The initiator element (ta/te) exhibits vowel harmony with the verb stem, while the terminal negator du remains invariant and pharyngealised across verb classes, paralleling the behaviour of ghi in Standard Igbo. Drawing exclusively on naturally occurring and elicited Izhi data, the paper demonstrates that negation interacts systematically with aspectual distinctions, particularly, perfective, progressive, future, and imperative constructions, which results in predictable formal alternations such as the insertion of ke in perfective-negatives and the replacement of du with shi or kwa in negative imperatives. The study further shows that future reference in Izhi is not morphologically encoded but is instead signalled tonally or contextually, a feature that extends into negative constructions. This paper is significant by situating Izhi negation within the broader typology of Igbo varieties and Niger-Congo negation systems. The paper also contributes to the documentation of underdescribed Igbo varieties and enriches current understanding of circumfix-like negation and aspect–negation interfaces in African languages.

Keywords: *Izhi; negation; circumfixation; vowel harmony; aspect; tone; Igbo morphosyntax; imperative negation*

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I. Introduction and Theoretical Background

1.1. Linguistic Background of Izhi

Izhi is a dialect of Igbo spoken primarily in parts of present-day Ebonyi State, southeastern Nigeria. Like other Igbo varieties, Izhi belongs to the Benue-Congo branch of Niger-Congo and exhibits core typological features associated with the group, including tonal contrast, predominantly isolating morphology with limited affixation, and a strong interaction between tone and grammar (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Emenanjo, 2015). Despite its genealogical proximity to Standard Igbo, Izhi displays distinctive morphosyntactic patterns, particularly in the domain of negation, aspect marking, and clause structure.

Descriptive work on Igbo varieties has repeatedly shown that non-standard dialects preserve grammatical patterns that are either reduced or reanalysed in Standard Igbo (Manfredi, 1991; Ndimele, 2003). Izhi negation, with its bipartite structure and extensive vowel harmony, constitutes one such area where dialectal grammar offers insight into the internal diversity and historical layering of Igbo morphosyntax. Yet, Izhi remains under-documented, and its negation system has not previously received focused analytical treatment.

This paper therefore aims to provide a careful, data-driven description of negation in Izhi, situating it within the broader typology of Igbo and Niger-Congo negation while foregrounding its internally coherent grammatical system.

1.2. Negation in Niger-Congo and Varieties of Igbo Languages

Negation in Niger-Congo languages is widely recognised as morphosyntactically diverse, ranging from preverbal particles to suffixal markers and bipartite constructions (Payne, 1985; Dryer, 2013). In many Benue-Congo languages, negation is expressed through discontinuous elements that surround the verb or clause nucleus, a pattern often analysed as circumfixation or discontinuous morphology (Aikhenvald, 2007).

Within Igbo and its dialects, negation commonly involves a postverbal marker (*ghi* in Standard Igbo) often accompanied by tonal or preverbal material, depending on tense–aspect–mood distinctions (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015). Standard Igbo typically employs *ghi* as a sentence-final or clause-final negator, while some dialects preserve additional preverbal elements that contribute to a bipartite or circumfix-like structure (Nwachukwu, 1987; Ndimele, 2003).

The Izhi system aligns typologically with this latter pattern. Its negation strategy does not rely on a single free morpheme but instead employs a paired configuration in which a preverbal initiator (*ta/te* and its vowel-harmonic variants) works in tandem with a postverbal negator (*du*). Such systems challenge simplistic affixal classifications and invite analysis in terms of discontinuous negation operators.

1.3. Circumfix-Like Negation and Discontinuous Morphology

Circumfixation, defined as the expression of a single grammatical function through two phonologically independent yet grammatically unified elements positioned at opposite edges of a lexical or syntactic domain, is well documented cross-linguistically (Plank, 1998; Spencer & Luís, 2012). In negation, circumfix-like patterns frequently arise in languages where diachronic layering leads to the retention of older negators alongside newer ones, resulting in bipartite constructions.

In African languages, such constructions often operate at the clause level rather than forming true bound circumfixes on the verb (Aikhenvald, 2007). The Izhi negator *ta/te...du* fits precisely into this category: while it resembles a circumfix functionally, the initial element behaves syntactically as a proclitic rather than a verbal prefix, and the final negator functions as a clause-level suffix.

This distinction is crucial for analysing Izhi negation, as it explains why the initiator exhibits phonological integration with the verb via vowel harmony, without forming a single morphological word.

1.4. Aspect, Tone, and Negation

Aspectual distinctions in Igbo *lsngusge* and dialects are known to interact closely with negation, often triggering formal alternations in negators or requiring specialised negative constructions (Emenanjo, 1978; Manfredi, 1991). Additionally, tone plays a central grammatical role in encoding tense and aspect, particularly where overt segmental marking is absent (Ndimele, 2003).

Izhi exemplifies this interaction vividly. As will be demonstrated in subsequent sections, perfective negation introduces an additional morpheme (*ke*) within the initiator complex, while future reference is expressed tonally rather than morphologically, both in affirmative and negative clauses. Imperative negation further departs from the declarative pattern by substituting the terminal negator *du* with *shi*, revealing mood-specific sensitivity within the negation system.

1.5. Aim and Scope of the Study

The central objectives of this paper are to:

1. Provide a systematic description of the morphosyntactic structure of negation in Izhi.
2. Examine the role of vowel harmony and phonological agreement in negative marking.
3. Analyse the interaction between negation and aspectual categories, including perfective, progressive, future, and imperative constructions.
4. Situate Izhi negation within the broader typological and Igbo linguistic literature.

The analysis relies exclusively on the Izhi data presented in this study and does not introduce hypothetical forms or reconstructed examples.

1.6. Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to sentential negation in Izhi. Other types of negation (such as constituent negation, lexical negation, or negative polarity items) fall outside the scope of the present analysis. Additionally, while tonal marking is acknowledged as central to tense and aspect distinction, the paper does not attempt a full autosegmental tonal analysis, focusing instead on the morphosyntactic implications of tonal contrasts.

II. Literature Review

Negation is a fundamental grammatical process through which languages deny or reverse the affirmative value of a proposition. Although the semantic function of negation is broadly comparable across languages, its structural realisation varies considerably. Languages may employ negative particles, prefixes, suffixes, auxiliaries, tonal alternations, discontinuous markers, or combinations of these mechanisms. Consequently, the study of negation necessarily involves the interface between morphology and syntax, particularly the forms of negative markers, their positions within the clause, their relationship with the verb, and their interaction with tense, aspect and mood.

Research on Igbo has established that negation is particularly sensitive to both morphological and phonological conditions. One of the earlier focused studies is Uba-Mgbemena (1981), who examines simple grammatical negatives in Igbo from syntactic, phonological and semantic perspectives. The study distinguishes lexical negatives from grammatical negatives and treats grammatical negation as a process through which affirmative sentences are converted into corresponding negative structures. Particularly important is the recognition that Igbo negation cannot be adequately described in purely morphological terms because negative

constructions may involve changes extending beyond the attachment of a negative morpheme. Uba-Mgbemena's analysis therefore provides an early foundation for viewing Igbo negation as an interface phenomenon involving grammatical structure, phonological form and interpretation.

A considerably broader account is provided by Ndimele (2009), who demonstrates that Igbo employs several strategies for marking negation. These include negative affixation, inherently negative auxiliary verbs, tonal alternation and contrastive focus. More importantly, Ndimele observes that negation interacts significantly with tense-aspect-mood categories and may trigger both segmental and tonal changes within its scope. Some tense-aspect-mood distinctions may even become neutralised under negation. The significance of this account lies in its demonstration that negative polarity in Igbo is integrated into the wider grammatical organisation of the clause rather than being represented by one invariant negative marker applicable across all environments. Ndimele also distinguishes predication negation from constituent negation, showing that the structural domain of negation affects the strategy through which it is realised.

The relevance of dialect-specific investigation becomes even clearer when individual Igbo varieties are considered. Obinna (2019) examines negation in the Ehugbo dialect, using categories that include indicative, progressive, perfective, future, unfulfilled and imperative constructions. The study establishes that Ehugbo does not employ a uniform negative strategy across these grammatical environments. Rather, negative marking involves both affixation and tone, with tonal properties of agreement prefixes and auxiliary verbs playing an important role in particular constructions. Obinna's findings are particularly relevant because Ehugbo, like Izhi, is spoken within the southeastern Igbo dialect continuum and demonstrates that tense, aspect and mood can determine the formal realisation of negative polarity within an individual Igbo variety.

Further evidence of dialectal variation comes from Ejnwa and Ofoha's (2019) study of the morphosyntax of negation in Okigwe Igbo. Their analysis demonstrates that Okigwe employs negative morphemes that differ substantially from the familiar Standard Igbo forms. Simple declarative constructions are reported to employ the negative suffix *-hu/-hụ*, whereas imperative constructions employ *-la/-le*. The study also reports specialised negative marking in perfective constructions. These findings are important for two reasons. First, they confirm that the morphological exponent of negation varies considerably across Igbo dialects. Second, they demonstrate that clause type and tense-aspect-mood distinctions may condition the selection of particular negative markers. Thus, the grammar of negation in one Igbo variety cannot safely be projected onto another without independent dialect-specific evidence.

Taken together, Uba-Mgbemena (1981), Ndimele (2009), Obinna (2019), and Ejnwa and Ofoha (2019) reveal several recurring properties of Igbo negation. First, negation is closely associated with the verbal and clausal systems. Second, its expression may involve both segmental morphology and tone. Third, negative marking is sensitive to tense, aspect and mood. Finally, considerable variation exists among Igbo dialects in both the forms of negative morphemes and their structural distribution. These observations make dialect-specific descriptions indispensable to a fuller understanding of Igbo negation.

The available Izhi data fit into this broader pattern while presenting a structurally distinctive system. Negation is principally expressed through the bipartite *tV...du* configuration, in which a preverbal negative initiator and a postverbal negative element jointly mark the negative construction. Unlike the patterns described for Standard Igbo, Ehugbo and Okigwe, the preverbal element in Izhi exhibits vowel-conditioned alternation, whereas *du* remains phonologically stable. The structure is additionally sensitive to aspect and mood: perfective negation modifies the form of the initial negative element, while imperative negation replaces *du* with *shi*. Future reference introduces a further dimension because it interacts with tonal rather than exclusively segmental marking.

The existing literature therefore provides an important comparative foundation but does not account for the particular structural configuration found in Izhi. The studies reviewed establish the considerable diversity of negative marking within Igbo and reinforce the need to investigate individual dialects on their own grammatical terms. The present study extends this line of inquiry by concentrating specifically on the morphosyntactic structure of negation in Izhi, particularly the relationship between the two components of its bipartite negative construction, their phonological behaviour, their syntactic distribution, and their interaction with aspect and mood.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive linguistic research design, grounded in qualitative grammatical analysis. The focus is on the internal structure and distribution of negation markers in Izhi, examined within naturally occurring clause types and controlled elicitation contexts. Descriptive approaches of this kind are widely recognised as appropriate for the documentation and analysis of underdescribed languages and dialects, particularly where the objective is to capture morphosyntactic regularities rather than test predictive models (Himmelman, 1998; Crowley, 2007).

The analysis is synchronic, aiming to describe the current grammatical system of Izhi as used by competent speakers, without recourse to historical reconstruction or speculative diachronic explanation.

3.2. Language Variety and Data Sources

The data analysed in this paper are drawn exclusively from Izhi, an Igb dialect spoken in Ebonyi State, southeastern Nigeria. All examples reflect authentic Izhi usage, as employed in everyday communication by native speakers. Care was taken to ensure that the forms analysed are not code-mixed or influenced by Standard Igbo, particularly in the domain of negation where dialect levelling is common.

Dialectal consistency was maintained by restricting analysis to forms that are internally coherent within Izhi and widely accepted by speakers as grammatical in ordinary speech.

3.3. Method of Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained using:

1. Targeted elicitation, focusing specifically on declarative clauses, negative constructions, aspectual contrasts (past, perfective, progressive, future), imperative and prohibitive forms
2. Naturally occurring speech forms, particularly common predicates involving eating, knowing, having, paying, fighting, and emotional or bodily actions (e.g. *ri* 'eat', *ama* 'know', *nwe* 'have', *pfi* 'pay', *lu* 'fight', *ara* 'cry').

Such a combination of elicited and naturally occurring data is standard in grammatical description, allowing for both systematic contrast and contextual validity (Chelliah & de Reuse, 2011).

No constructed or hypothetical examples were introduced beyond forms that are clearly licensed by attested Izhi morphosyntax.

3.4. Method of Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded through four related stages. First, the negative constructions were morphologically segmented to identify the negative initiator, verb stem, postverbal negator and other relevant constituents. Second, the syntactic distribution and scope of *ta/te* and *du* were examined in relation to the verb and clause structure, with particular attention to their circumfix-like behaviour. Third, the phonological relationship between the preverbal initiator (*ta*, *te*, *ti*, *to*, etc.) and the initial vowel of the verb was analysed to determine patterns of vowel harmony, while the invariant behaviour of *du* was also considered. Finally, the constructions were compared across the tense, aspect and mood categories represented in the data. This comparison focused particularly on changes in perfective negation, including the occurrence of *ke*, and the replacement of *du* with *shi* in negative imperatives.

3.4.1. Interpretive glossing

All examples were glossed using standard Leipzig Glossing Rules, ensuring transparency and comparability with descriptions of other Igbo varieties.

3.5. Analytical Framework

The study adopts a functionally informed morphosyntactic framework, which treats negation as a clause-level operator whose formal realisation is sensitive to aspect, mood, and phonological constraints. This approach is consistent with established analyses of negation in African languages, where morphology, syntax, and phonology interact closely (Payne, 1985; Dryer, 2013; Emenanjo, 2015).

Circumfix-like negation is analysed descriptively rather than imposed as a strict morphological category, recognising that in Izhi the negative markers function as discontinuous elements with shared grammatical scope rather than as a single bound morpheme.

4.1. The Bipartite Structure of Negation

Negation in Izhi is realised through a discontinuous morphemic configuration consisting of a preverbal initiator and a postverbal negator. The structure can be schematised as:

[Subject – NEG₁ – Verb – NEG₂ – (Object)]

where NEG₁ is realised as *ta/te* (with vowel-harmonic variants), and NEG₂ is realised invariantly as *du*. Together, these elements encode a single semantic operation – sentential negation – despite being phonologically and syntactically separated.

This bipartite structure behaves functionally like a circumfix, in that the verb phrase is “enclosed” by the negation markers, although neither element alone is sufficient to license a negative interpretation. Such systems have been widely documented in African languages and are often characterised as circumfix-like rather than true bound circumfixes (Payne, 1985; Aikhenvald, 2007).

The following examples illustrate the basic negative structure in Izhi:

- (1) **M ta amadu du**
1SG NEG know NEG
'I don't know.'

- (2) **M te nwedu dɿ**
1SG NEG have NEG
'I don't have.'
- (3) **I ti pfudu ugwo**
2SG NEG pay NEG debt
'You will not pay (the debt).'

In all cases, the negator occurs in two obligatory parts. The absence of either the initiator or the suffixal negator renders the clause ungrammatical or semantically incomplete, confirming their interdependence as a single grammatical operator.

4.2. The Preverbal Initiator (*ta/te*) and Vowel Harmony

The preverbal negation marker in Izhi is realised as *ta*, *te*, *ti*, *to*, and other vowel variants, collectively represented here as *tV*. This element occupies a fixed position immediately preceding the verb stem and behaves phonologically as a proclitic.

Crucially, the vowel of the initiator exhibits vowel harmony with the initial vowel of the verb root. This harmony is progressive and local, aligning the vocalic quality of the negator with that of the verb it scopes over. For example:

- *ta ama* → **ta amadɿ**
- *te nwe* → **te nwedɿ**
- *ti pfu* → **ti pfudɿ**

Such vowel agreement reflects a broader Igbo tendency toward vowel harmony across functional morphemes (Emenanjo, 1978; Ndimele, 2003). However, in Izhi, this process is particularly systematic within negation, further supporting the close grammatical integration of the initiator with the verb phrase.

Despite this phonological integration, *tV* does not form a single morphological word with the verb; it remains syntactically independent, a property consistent with proclitics rather than prefixes.

4.3. The Postverbal Negator (*dɿ*)

The second component of Izhi negation is the suffixal negator *dɿ*, which occurs at the right edge of the verb phrase. Unlike the initiator, *dɿ* does **not** participate in vowel harmony. Its vowel remains pharyngealised (dotted) across all contexts and verb classes.

This invariance contrasts sharply with the harmonic behaviour of *tV* and strongly suggests that *dɿ* is lexically specified for its phonological form. Functionally, *dɿ* parallels Standard Igbo *ghị*, which also occupies a postverbal or clause-final position and remains phonologically stable across constructions (Emenanjo, 2015).

However, unlike Standard Igbo, where *ghị* often serves as the sole negative exponent, *dɿ* in Izhi is obligatorily paired with a preverbal initiator. This pairing reflects a more conservative negation strategy, preserving a bipartite configuration that has been reduced or simplified in some other Igbo varieties (Nwachukwu, 1987).

4.4. Syntactic Scope and Clause-Level Negation

Both components of the Izhi negator take scope over the entire verb phrase rather than over individual constituents. This is evident from their fixed positions relative to the verb and objects, as well as from the impossibility of intervening material disrupting the negation domain.

For example, in (3), the object *ugwo* 'debt' follows the verb but precedes no negative element, confirming that the negation applies to the proposition as a whole rather than targeting the object alone.

This clause-level scope aligns Izhi negation with canonical sentential negation systems, as described in typological literature (Dryer, 2013), and supports analysing *ta/te...dɿ* as a unified grammatical operator despite its discontinuous realisation.

4.5. Comparison with Standard Igbo

A brief comparison with Standard Igbo highlights both continuity and divergence. Standard Igbo typically uses *ghị* as a postverbal negator:

- (4) *Ọ maghị*
3SG know NEG
'He/she does not know.'

In contrast, Izhi preserves a preverbal negation initiator in addition to a postverbal marker. This suggests that Izhi has either retained an older negation strategy or developed a distinct grammaticalisation path in which both elements remain obligatory.

V. Negation and Aspectual Distinctions in Izhi

Negation in Izhi does not operate uniformly across all aspectual environments. Rather, it exhibits systematic sensitivity to aspect and temporal reference, resulting in predictable formal adjustments to the basic bipartite negation structure. This section examines how negation interacts with perfective, progressive, and future aspect.

5.1. Perfective Aspect and Negative Marking

The perfective aspect in Izhi encodes an action that is completed prior to the reference time or whose resultant state is relevant at the time of speaking. In affirmative constructions, the perfective is morphologically derived from the past tense through the insertion of the morpheme *wa* before the past marker *ru*, as shown below:

- (5) **O riwaru nri**
3SG eat-PERF food
'He has eaten.'
- (6) **O luwaru ogu**
3SG fight-PERF war
'He has fought.'

When negation applies to the perfective aspect, the structure of the negator undergoes a morphological expansion. Specifically, the initiator *tV* incorporates the morpheme *kV*, yielding composite forms such as *teke*, *taka*, *tiki*, *teka*, and *toko*. As in the basic negation structure, the vowel of the initiator continues to harmonise with the vowel of the verb stem.

This is illustrated in the following example:

- (7) **O toko oridu nri**
3SG NEG.PERF eat NEG food
'He has not eaten.'

The insertion of *kV* serves to encode the perfective-negative meaning, signalling that the expected completion of the event has not occurred. This pattern confirms that aspectual distinctions are not solely encoded on the verb but may also be reflected within the negation complex itself.

Such aspect-sensitive negation is well attested in Igbo language, where negative morphology often diverges from affirmative paradigms in the perfective domain (Emenanjo, 1978; Ndimele, 2003).

5.2. Progressive Aspect and Negation

The progressive aspect in Izhi is expressed through the **bare infinitive verb form**, without additional auxiliary morphology:

- (8) **Òò ri nri**
3SG eat food
'He is eating.'
- (9) **Ó ò lu ogu**
3SG fight war
'He is fighting.'

In progressive constructions, negation follows the default bipartite structure, without the insertion of *ke* or any additional aspectual morphology on the negator. The initiator *tV* precedes the verb, while *du* occupies its clause-final position.

- (10) **Ó to ri-du nri**
3SG NEG eat-NEG food
'He is not eating.'
- (11) **Ó tọ ludu ogu**
3SG NEG fightNEG war/fight
'He is not fighting.'

The absence of special negative marking in the progressive suggests that, unlike the perfective, the progressive aspect does not trigger formal modification within the negation system. Instead, aspectual interpretation is derived compositionally from the interaction of verb form, context, and negation.

When the subject is lexical rather than pronominal, the verb surfaces in its participial form:

- (12) **Uche eri nri**
Uche PART-eat. food
'Uche is eating.'

Negation in such constructions maintains the same circumfixed configuration, further demonstrating the structural stability of Izhi negation across progressive contexts.

- (13) **Uche te eridụ nri**
 Uche NEG PART-eat-NEG. food
 ‘Uche is not eating.’

5.3. Future Aspect and Tonal Encoding

One of the striking features of Izhi grammar is the absence of a segmental future tense marker. Instead, futurity is encoded tonally, with the distinction between present and future readings arising from tonal variation on the verb or subject, rather than from overt morphological exponents.

This is illustrated by the contrast between the following clauses, which are segmentally identical:

- (14) **Uche è-ri nri**
 ‘Uche is eating.’ (Present declarative)

- (15) **Uche é-ri nri**
 ‘Uche will eat.’ (Future)

The interpretation of these clauses as present or future depends entirely on tonal contours, a strategy that aligns with broader Niger-Congo patterns where tone serves core grammatical functions (Williamson, 1989; Ndimele, 2003).

5.4. Negation in the Future Aspect

Despite the tonal nature of future marking, negation in future constructions does not introduce any special morphological negator distinct from the default pattern. Instead, the same bipartite structure *ta/te...dụ* applies, while context or adjunct/adverbial elements signal futurity.

- (16) **Uche te eridụ nri**
 Uche NEG PART-eat-NEG. food
 ‘Uche will not eat.’
- (17) **Uche te eridụ nri etchele**
 Uche NEG PART-eat-NEG. food tomorrow
 ‘Uche will not eat tomorrow.’

This demonstrates that in Izhi, negation is morphosyntactically independent of tense but compositionally compatible with tonal temporal distinctions. The negator operates at the clause level, while tone or context encodes temporal reference.

5.5. Immediate Future Constructions with *abya*

Immediate future or prospective aspect in Izhi is marked by the lexical element *abya* (‘about to’), which precedes the infinitive form of the verb:

- (18) **Uche abya ara ekwa**
 Uche IM-FUT cry cry
 ‘Uche is about to cry.’

In negative constructions, *abya* is enclosed within the bipartite negation structure. The initiator *tV* precedes *abya*, while *dụ* follows the verb:

- (19) **Uche ta abyadụ ara ekwa**
 Uche NEG IM-FUT NEG cry cry
 ‘Uche is not about to cry.’

This configuration confirms that *abya* falls within the scope of sentential negation and that the bipartite negator retains its structural integrity even when additional functional material intervenes between the negation markers and the lexical verb.

VI. Imperative and Prohibitive Negation in Izhi

Negation in Izhi displays clear mood sensitivity, reaching its most structurally distinct manifestation in imperative and prohibitive constructions. Unlike declarative clauses, where negation is realised through the circumfix-like *ta/te...dụ* configuration, imperative negation involves systematic reconfiguration of the negative morphology. This section describes the formal properties, variants, and pragmatic extensions of negative imperatives in Izhi.

6.1. Basic Structure of Negative Imperatives

Negative imperatives in Izhi are formed using a preverbal *tV* negator (as in declarative negation), but crucially, the postverbal negator *dụ* is replaced by *shi*. We will refer to *shi* as a prohibitive marker PROH for short. The resulting structure can be represented as:

NEG – Verb – PROH

This pattern contrasts sharply with declarative negation, confirming that imperative clauses form a distinct grammatical environment in Izhi.

The basic prohibitive forms are illustrated below:

- (20) **Te rishi**
NEG eat PROH
'Don't eat.'
- (21) **Ta byashi**
NEG come PROH
'Don't come.'

The use of *shi* as the terminal prohibitive marker encodes directive force, signalling that the speaker is issuing a command prohibiting the realisation of the action depicted by the verb. This strategy aligns with a widespread cross-linguistic pattern in which negative imperatives employ specialised morphology distinct from declarative negation (Aikhenvald, 2010; Payne, 1985).

6.2. Morphosyntactic Properties of *shi*

The morpheme *shi* occupies a position analogous to *du* but differs in both grammatical function and distribution. While *du* encodes propositional negation in declarative clauses, *shi* encodes illocutionary negation, directly targeting the addressee's intended action rather than merely negating a proposition.

Unlike *du*, *shi* does alternate with respect to vowel harmony – harmonizing the verb. However, it maintains its specialised status as a mood-specific prohibitive marker.

Such a split between declarative and imperative negation has been observed in several Igbo varieties and Benue-Congo languages, where prohibitive constructions recruit distinct morphemes rather than reusing general negators (Emenanjo, 2015; Ndimele, 2003).

6.3. Phonological Reduction in Rapid Speech

In fast or informal speech, Izhi allows phonological reduction of the preverbal negator. Specifically, the consonantal segment /t/ of the initiator *tV* may be deleted, leaving only the vowel:

- (22) **E rishi**
NEG eat.PROH
'Don't eat.'

This reduction does not affect the grammaticality or pragmatic force of the prohibition but reflects natural phonetic erosion under conditions of rapid articulation. Importantly, the prohibitive force remains recoverable through *shi*, which continues to mark the clause as a negative command.

Such reduction phenomena are widely attested in spoken language and do not constitute separate grammatical constructions but rather phonetic variants of the same underlying structure (Crowley, 2007).

6.4. Cautionary Prohibitive Constructions

Izhi further distinguishes **cautionary prohibitives**, in which the terminal marker *shi* is replaced by *kwa*. This substitution intensifies the directive force of the negation, signalling caution, urgency, insistence, or speaker authority:

- (23) **Te rikwa**
NEG eat CAUT
'Don't eat (emphatic).'

Or

- (24) **E rikwa**
NEG eat CAUT
'Don't eat (emphatic).'

The use of *kwa* introduces a pragmatic nuance absent in neutral prohibitive constructions. Rather than encoding simple prohibition, cautionary forms convey heightened speaker stance, often in contexts involving warning, reprimand, or strong discouragement.

The replacement of one terminal negator with another in imperative constructions mirrors pragmatic layering strategies observed in other African languages, where emphasis is encoded through specialised particles rather than through intonation alone (Aikhenvald, 2010).

6.5. Sociolectal/Idiolectal Variant with *ba/be*

An additional variant observed in Izhi involves the replacement of the standard negative imperative initiator *ta* with *ba* or *be* (depending on vowel harmony rule) in certain speakers' idiolects or group's sociolect:

- (25) **Ba arashi ekwa**
NEG cry PROH
'Don't cry.'

- (25) **Be edjeshi**
NEG go PROH
'Don't go.'

This form does not alter the syntactic structure or semantic interpretation of the negative imperative but reflects idiolectal or possibly sociolectal variation within the speech community. The coexistence of *ta* and *ba* suggests flexibility in the realisation of the initiator while preserving the core prohibitive structure.

Such variation is typical of dialects with strong oral traditions and underscores the importance of documenting alternative forms without prematurely collapsing them into a single "standard" grammar.

6.6. Imperative Negation and Grammatical Architecture

The imperative negation system in Izhi reveals a restructuring rather than a simple reuse of declarative negation. The consistent replacement of *du* with *shi* (or *kwa*) indicates that negative imperatives are not derived mechanically from declarative negatives but are instead governed by a distinct set of morphosyntactic constraints. This distinction supports broader theoretical claims that mood interacts with negation in non-trivial ways, often triggering specialised morphological paradigms (Payne, 1985; Aikhenvald, 2010).

VII. Conclusion

This study has examined the morphosyntactic structure of negation in Izhi, showing that its basic negative construction is realised through the bipartite *tV...du* configuration. While the preverbal *tV* element exhibits vowel-conditioned alternation, *du* remains invariant. The analysis further demonstrates that negative marking interacts with aspect and mood. Perfective negation modifies the preverbal negative element, whereas imperative negation replaces *du* with *shi*, with additional cautionary or emphatic and speech variant *kwa* attested in the data. Future reference is particularly noteworthy because its distinction from the corresponding non-future forms depends substantially on tone rather than an independent segmental future marker. These patterns demonstrate that negation in Izhi cannot be adequately described by reference to a single negative morpheme. Rather, it constitutes an internally organised system in which morphology, syntax, phonology, aspect and mood interact in determining the form of negative constructions.

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